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A spy's strange odyssey leaves doubt in Washington

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WASHINGTON — This is the story of Vitaly Yurchenko, a major or minor KGB agent who came to the United States by means of deceit, defection or drugs.

Once here, he spilled important or trivial Soviet secrets to the CIA. And finally, on Wednesday, he was flown back to his homeland — due to lovesickness, loneliness or simply because his mission was over.

As in a carnival hallway of bent and cracked mirrors, the truth is that no one knows what the truth is. Except perhaps Yurchenko himself, who isn't talking and wouldn't be believed if he did.

Virtually all that the American public knows about the Yurchenko affair comes from second- and third-hand sources, many of whom are unnamed intelligence sources trained to operate in a shadowy underworld of intrigue and lies.

Information about Yurchenko's background, however, became available Friday when, in an uncommon move, the CIA issued a three-page biography of him, listing all his spying posts and responsibilities. The document gave no indication of where the information was obtained or how it was verified.

The CIA document indicated that Yurchenko would have been in a position to provide a wide array of valuable information, and said that he had most recently supervised Soviet spying in North America and had worked on putting double agents into U.S. intelligence services.

But as for the events that led up to his return to the Soviet Union, we are left with the barest plot in the LaCarre manner, together with some educated speculation about what underlies the skeletal scenario that unfolded as follows:

SCENE ONE: It is midsummer 1985. The Vatican Museums in Rome, famed for tapestries, apartments, grottoes, Raphaels, Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling and Greco-Roman antiquities collected by the popes. Yurchenko, 50, on assignment in Rome and traveling under diplomatic cover, asks Vatican officials for sanctuary. On Aug. 1, with the help of Italian authorities, Yurchenko is received as a defector by the U.S. Embassy.

SCENE TWO: Several weeks later, Yurchenko has been sent to Coventry, which

in his case is a magnificent home near a lake in the 500-acre Coventry subdivision about 22 miles west of Fredericksburg, Va., and a few miles from a secret communications base. His CIA guardians are "debriefing" him. Yurchenko fingers former CIA agent Edward Howard, 33, as a Soviet agent, possibly a onetime "mole."

SCENE THREE: Santa Fe, N.M. A moonless night in late September. FBI agents are watching Howard's home. But their quarry slips away and catches a plane, leaving behind his wife, a 2-year-old son and a job with the state legislature. Howard flies to Austria for a rendezvous with the Soviets, according to the FBI. Later, he is spotted in Helsinki, Finland.

SCENE FOUR: Sometime in October. U.S. intelligence sources, none of whom is named, confide to reporters that Yurchenko was nothing less than a deputy chairman of the KGB, chief of Soviet spy operations, perhaps the most valuable Soviet defector in 50 years.

"This guy was a big, big biggie — and he's left the KGB all ... up," one source says. Exults gleeful British intelligence expert Christopher Andrew: "He is worth about 20,000 seduced West German secretaries."

SCENE FIVE: Nov. 2, 1985. A drizzly Saturday night with a mid-autumn chill in the air. An all-night bistro at the corner of Wisconsin and Dumbarton amid the colonial atmosphere of Washington's Georgetown sector. The name of the place is Au Pied de Cochon. In English, that means pig's foot, a prime appetizer. The decor is Gallic kitsch. The centerpiece is a copper hog mounted on a black metallic weathervane.

Yurchenko and a CIA officer take a table near the window, where a waiter named Etienne serves them. Between them is a red carnation peering out of a Perrier bottle.

Yurchenko: What would you do if I got up and walked out? Would you shoot me?

CIA officer: No, of course not. We don't treat defectors that way.

Yurchenko (rising): If I'm not back in 15 minutes, don't blame yourself. (He walks out and vanishes into the mist on Wisconsin Avenue.)

SCENE SIX: A rain-drenched twilight two days later. A news conference in the Soviet compound on a hill in upper Georgetown. Yurchenko, accompanied by grim-faced Soviet officials, tells the reporters that he had been drugged in Rome, abducted to the United States, and imprisoned, grilled and tortured for months, then escaped in a moment of CIA laxity. He says he longs to go home.

SCENE SEVEN: Wednesday, Nov. 6. The White House. President Reagan, speaking hours before Yurchenko boards an Aeroflot airliner bound for Moscow, tells reporters: "The information he provided was not anything new or sensational. It was pretty much information already known to the CIA."

In Washington, among the politicians, the former spooks and people at large, there are two basic theories, each with many variations.

Either Yurchenko was a Soviet agent from beginning to end, assigned to ferret out information about CIA methods and knowledge, spread misleading information, perhaps to embarrass the United States on the eve of a summit conference.

Or he was a genuine Soviet defector who, like half that breed, changed his mind, being unable to cope with the emotional strain of being alone in an alien land.

Whichever way it was, the consensus is that the CIA wound up with a faceful of eggs.

"If this guy was legitimate, we handled it badly. If he was a plant, we handled it badly," said Sen. William S. Cohen (R., Maine), a member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

One advocate of the double-agent theory is a former CIA station chief in several of the world's espionage hot spots, who gave this view of Yurchenko.

"Most likely, his whole so-called defection was staged and manipulated from the very beginning. The Soviets were ready for his reappearance. Saturday night is Sunday morning in Moscow when this guy calls in. How many people are in the (Soviet) embassy on Saturday night ready to take action?"

"It seems to me that before the Soviets considered putting him up before the American press, they had to be sure what he was going to say. That's impossible to do on a Sunday and a Monday" without preparation.

"There's a big bureaucratic structure in Moscow. Things have to be coordinated, cleared and improved. ... That's a lot of decisiveness in a hurry. ... The speed with which they acted suggests that, at a minimum, they expected this guy to show up on Saturday night."

Furthermore, he said, a bona fide defector is under great stress when he leaves his family, property and heritage.

The typical defector's later decision to redefect is preceded by a new round of tension and anguish. Usually, he becomes "very critical of his surroundings and the way he is treated. He has a lot of unfulfilled demands," the former intelligence agent said.

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"But those signs were undetected, or he would not have been taken to dinner. . . . Normally . . . U.S. authorities deliver [a double defector] to his own officials by prearrangement."

Yurchenko's self-assured manner at the Nov. 4 news conference in the Soviet compound was another factor in leading some observers to conclude that he was a make-believe defector.

"I was impressed by the way he talked to the Soviets," a former intelligence operative said. "He shushed them. He said what he wanted to say. You don't do that if you're a man facing punishment."

But many knowledgeable sources reject that double-agent theory, adhering instead to the notion that Yurchenko was a true defector who was mishandled by the CIA, became increasingly homesick and suffered severe depression when his love affair with a Soviet woman in Canada soured — possibly with assistance from his masters at the KGB.

Sen. David Durenberger (R., Minn.), chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, is a leading proponent of that theory.

He said, based on his discussions with CIA officials, including director William Casey, that Yurchenko, after furnishing "very valuable" information to U.S. authorities, went "into a blue funk" for six weeks after his love affair ended, and he decided to bail out.

According to some sources, Yurchenko had believed that the woman he loved, the wife of a Soviet diplomat in Ottawa, would leave her husband and join him in the United States. But she refused, possibly because the Soviets had "gotten to her," Senate Intelligence Committee sources said.

The CIA, realizing it had a shaky man on its hands, agreed to escort him to Canada so he could appeal to her in person. Committee sources confirmed that the trip took place, with the assistance of Canadian agents, about seven weeks ago. Again, she refused to go away with him.

Abandoned by his beloved, lacking a bond of friendship with anyone around him, Yurchenko had "lost all hope," said Yelena Mitrokhina, who was a worker at the Soviet Embassy here when she defected in 1978.

(Incidentally, Yurchenko's girlfriend is not the Russian woman who died in a 27-story fall in Toronto last week, Canadian and U.S. officials said.)

Others, however, speculated that the Soviets threatened to harm Yurchenko's 16-year-old son unless he were to return and accuse the United States of having terrorized him for months.

Durenberger and others suggested that the CIA had bungled the Yurchenko operation at several points. For example, Durenberger said, the CIA had recognized the psychological warning signs that suggested that Yurchenko was a prime candidate for double defection. But on Nov. 2, his CIA "handlers" were off duty, leaving him in the hands of an inexperienced man who knew nothing of Yurchenko's depression, the intelligence committee chairman said.

There is another argument advanced by those who believe Yurchenko was a real defector.

"My sense is that if it was a set-up, he would have waited longer before revealing himself," a former U.S. intelligence official said. "He came out too soon. He'd want to stay around to learn more about how we function before he went back."

"He may have got cold feet because some people on the inside of the CIA began to doubt him and view him as a fake. He may have seen that he wasn't going to be set up for life."

Now that the Soviet mystery man is back in Moscow — and, according to unconfirmed reports, the woman he loves was flown there last week, too — has he come in from the cold or into the deep freeze?

Again, the experts split. They expect the Soviets to wring all the propaganda value possible out of him. Maybe he'll be promoted, the double agent theorists say.

Mitrokhina, who has lived in Washington since her defection, said that if he is a double defector, "he will not have his job or any job." George Carver, a former U.S. intelligence official, predicted a grimmer future. "He'll be taken to Lubyanka," he said, referring to a prison in Moscow, "and, if he's lucky, a bullet will be put in the base of his skull."

In Washington, meanwhile, capitalism is alive and well. At Au Pied de Cochon, they're serving a new dish: "Moskovski borscht."